

July 2020

Newsletter

OCEC Begins the Second Year of our Firewise Plan

Recently the Methow Valley has experienced a “new normal” of longer, drier, more dangerous fire seasons.

OCEC is taking proactive actions in regards to lowering the risk of trees outside our standard easements and required clear zones which could make contact with the overhead lines and create potential ignition sources. The actions we are taking are based on similar programs developed by California utilities in response to recent major wildfires. This is the second season of our program.

OCEC has an ongoing right-of-way maintenance program to manage vegetation posing a threat to power lines. We augmented this program by bringing in an outside forester in 2019 to survey the lines and the trees outside of the easements. From this survey, areas of potential treatment were identified and we are in the process of completing this work. This survey, by an outside forester, will be performed again in 2021. OCEC is also working with the department of natural resources (DNR) on a task force to mitigate danger trees outside of electric line right-of-way on DNR land. The task force is also working to enhance DNR’s investigative procedures to require independent experts to assist DNR with fire investigation where power lines may be involved. OCEC also relies on members to notify us of large branches or hazard trees that could potentially fall through the lines on windy days. If you come across one of these situations, please report it to our office.

In addition to vegetation management, OCEC will take the extra step to minimize the risk of fire during red-flag conditions by turning off substation reclosers during these times. A recloser is an automatic high-voltage electric switch that operates much like a circuit breaker in your home. When a household breaker trips, it will remain off until it is manually reset. A recloser will test the electric line by automatically closing to see if the problem has been removed, if the problem was only temporary, the recloser will stay closed and power will remain on. This operation is sometimes seen as a “blink” at your home. To mitigate the risk of fire, OCEC will place the reclosers on “non-reclose” so when there is a possible problem, the breaker will operate and the line will be de-energized until OCEC crews can manually inspect the line for problems. Once the line is manually inspected and it is all-clear, the line will be re-energized. This will possibly create longer, more frequent outages. Additionally, certain remote, forested areas will have their reclosers turned off starting when dry conditions warrant it. Because the 2019 season was relatively wet OCEC did not turn off the substation

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Hours:

Monday - Thursday
7:00 am - 5:30 PM

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reclosers. OCEC did turn off the reclosers in the remote, forested areas. There were a few additional outages in these areas because of this.

One of the fire mitigation techniques employed in California is "Public Safety Power Shutoffs". These are used in California during extreme red-flag conditions when high winds are forecasted. OCEC is studying the possibility of also using this technique, as a last resort, when high winds are forecasted during red-flag conditions. This would involve proactively de-energizing portions of circuits during these extreme conditions. OCEC is working with the outside forester on possible protocols, conditions and locations of these possible proactive outages.

Taking these proactive steps during red-flag conditions may cause more frequent and longer outages but we hope that our members understand that the benefits of reduced fire risk outweigh the increase in possible outages.

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